

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

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Agencies continue investigation of fish kill in Pearl River

BATON ROUGE – State, local and federal agencies continue to respond to a fish kill in the Pearl River that originated near Bogalusa in Washington Parish. This fish kill was reported on Saturday and the slug of black water believed to have caused or contributed to the fish kills has moved south through St. Tammany Parish.

In response to the event, the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness has deployed its Mobile Command Unit to the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) Pearl River Wildlife Management Area to serve as unified command area to support local emergency management and other state agencies in this response effort. GOHSEP has also activated its Crisis Action Team. LDWF and the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) continue to monitor the water in Pearl River. Water sampling results for dissolved oxygen and pH show the river is returning to normal water quality.

Officials from DEQ worked with its counterparts in Mississippi to have the Pearl River Valley Water Supply District increase the discharge from the Ross Barnett Reservoir to increase the flow in the Pearl River, according to the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality. The increased flow in the river will increase the amount of fresh water in the river and help increase the low oxygen currently in the river.

LDWF fisheries biologists continue to survey the Pearl River, beginning in Pools Bluff Sill south to the Rigolets. On Tuesday, August 16, LDWF staff surveyed 36 miles of the West Pearl River from Holmes Bayou to the Rigolets.

The total number of dead fish and mussels is still being compiled; information from each day's surveillance will be assembled for a total count at the end of the event. The final total estimates will include those from DEQ and Mississippi DEQ. To date, 24 species of fish have been identified as part of the fish kill, including paddlefish, American eels, catfish, bass, bluegill and shad. Two species of freshwater mussels have also been identified in the fish kill.

Also included in the kill are Gulf sturgeon -- a species listed as "threatened" under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. As of August 16, 19 Gulf sturgeon were collected by LDWF. Specimens are being handed over to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) as part of their investigation. LDWF fisheries biologists and enforcement agents are assisting USFWS in the investigation.

The Department of Health and Hospitals recommends the following precautions, if you encounter or come into contact with (are exposed to) a fish kill:

- Stay out of the affected waters If you were exposed to these waters, then bathe well with soap and water. Use antiseptics on any open cut or wound.
- Do not eat, handle, or collect any fish or shellfish from the affected waters.
- Do not let pets wade or swim in, drink, or eat fish from the affected waters.

• Seek medical advice if you experience illness that may be related to exposures to a fish kill, such as skin irritation or infection, upset stomach, sore throat, or breathing difficulty.

The investigation into the cause of the fish kill continues.

The agencies involved have put together the following list of frequently asked questions to assist local officials and the public:

Pearl River Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

- Q. Where do we call with complaints/information?
- A. The DEQ hotline number is 225-342-1234 or 1-888-763-5424. The DEQ Regional Office number is 504-736-7701. The LDWF 24-hour hotline for reporting further fish kill impacts is 1-800-442-2511. If someone has questions about coming into contact with "black water," the number for the Louisiana Poison Center, which is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, is 1-800-222-1222. Media inquiries should go to 225-219-3964 or 225-329-9743.
- Q. Is my drinking water safe?
- A. Yes. *No* public water systems take water from the Pearl River, so there is no risk to drinking water from community water systems. Additionally, out of an abundance of caution, DHH sampled three public water systems along the Pearl River for volatile organic contaminants (VOCs) to confirm that the ground water supply was not impacted by the discharge incident. The samples showed no increase in VOCs and no VOCs above contaminant levels set by the Environmental Protection Agency.
- Q. What about private well water?
- A. Private wells should be constructed in a way that does not take water from the river, so they should not be impacted. Additional testing of public water systems shows no VOCs above the level of concern in groundwater. People who are concerned should have their wells tested and/or treated.
- Q. Are there any human health risks from the substance that was discharged into the river?
- A. Fish kills occur for several reasons. The most common cause of death in a fish kill is a sudden shortage or absence of oxygen in the water. This does not pose a major human health risk. If a hazardous substance is involved, more caution will be required. Testing is currently underway by public safety officials. In the meantime, DHH recommends the following precautions, if you encounter or come in contact with (are exposed to) a fish kill:
- Stay out of the affected waters If you went into these waters, then bathe well with soap and water. Use antiseptics on any open cut or wound.
- Do not eat, handle, or collect any fish or shellfish from the affected waters.
- Do not let pets wade or swim in, drink, or eat fish from the affected waters.
- Seek medical advice if you experience illness that may be related to contact with the water or dead fish and might include skin irritation or infection, GI upset, sore throat, or breathing difficulty.
- Q. Are any waterways closed as a result of this incident?
- A. No. The Pearl River is a federally designated waterway; only the U.S. Coast Guard may issue a closure for this river and it has not done so at this time.
- Q. What is the "Black Water" that is referred to in this incident?
- A. We believe that the black water originated from an upset condition in the wastewater treatment system at the Temple Inland facility in Bogalusa. However, we are in the middle of investigating the existing facts of the matter and are awaiting the results of analytical tests. This material is what is commonly known in the paper industry as black liquor. This material has a very high level of organic material that quickly reduces the

available dissolved oxygen in the water. Fish and other aquatic life actually suffocate when trapped in this water.

- Q. Who is responsible for this incident?
- A. An investigation is ongoing by Louisiana, Mississippi and Federal officials to determine the cause or causes that lead to the fish kill. Again, we believe that the black water originated from an upset condition in the wastewater treatment system at the Temple Inland facility in Bogalusa. However, the investigation continues as agencies continue to gather data.
- Q. When the responsible party is found what happens to them?
- A. The various agencies involved will each take the appropriate enforcement action based on the facts each uncovered during the investigation
- Q. What are the terms DO and pH?
- A. DO stands for dissolved oxygen. It is a key factor in a healthy ecosystem and sufficient dissolved oxygen is necessary for fish to 'breathe'. While the level of DO varies widely depending on the water body, a level of 5-7 parts per million would be normally expected in the upper reaches of the Pearl River. Additionally, pH is a chemical description for the acid/base condition of water. It is based on a 0-14 scale with 6-8 considered generally to be normal.
- Q. When will the river be back to normal?
- A. The facility has been shut down since Saturday. As such, there is no flow of effluent from the facility. The material has flowed down the river to the Rigolets. Subsequently, the water at the source of the discharge has already recovered. DEQ has specialized personnel that will be on scene tomorrow that will examine the hydrology (movement, distribution, and quality of water) of the river. After that examination we may better be able to determine when the water quality of the river will be back to normal. Water monitoring in the river shows the DO and pH levels are getting back to normal.
- Q. Who is going to clean up the dead fish?
- A. Temple Inland is hiring contractors and local fishermen to clean up the floating dead fish. Citizens should leave the clean up to the contractors since federal and state law requires certain information be collected in these types and numbers of fish collected in these incidents. The estimated cleanup time if four to five days, but no timeframe is set because of the number of fish to be recovered may increase.
- Q. Where will the dead fish go?
- A. The fish will be disposed in a manner that meets local state, and federal laws.
- Q. What kinds of fish are included in the fish kill?
- A. As of now, LDWF biologists have identified 24 different species of fish in the fish kill. Some of those species are the paddlefish, the American eel, catfish, bluegill, bass and shad. Two species of freshwater mussels were also impacted by the fish kill.
- Q. Were Gulf sturgeon, listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, impacted by the fish kill?
- A. Yes, 19 Gulf sturgeon (as of August 16) have been collected by LDWF officials and are in the custody of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for further investigation.
- Q. Is the responsible party going to be shut down?
- A. The facility suspected of the source of the discharge is currently not in operation. They will not resume operations until we have assurance that they can do so safely. Also, agencies are working with the company to assure that preventative measures are taken to prevent recurrence.

- Q. When did the fish start dying?
- A. The investigation of the exact chain of events is still ongoing. We were notified of the incident on Saturday, and the fish appeared at that time to have been dead for several days.
- Q. How far did the pollution spread?
- A. The investigation is ongoing; however DEQ believes the main mass of "Black Water" travelled down the West Pearl to the Rigolets.